Subversive Submissive

Issue 1

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An Introduction

Three years ago, in March 2006, I started a blog called "Subversive Submissive"[1] and began to write about my experiences with BDSM[2]. At the time, I had already been aware of my submissive sexuality for two or three years, and had explored some aspects of d/s with my previous partner—mostly playing with light bondage and rough sex—but had never quite gotten over my inhibitions around BDSM and around sex in general. Instead, I had blamed my partner for just not being dominant enough, not being the man that I needed; sometimes, I had blamed myself for having these desires in the first place. Obviously, neither of these were healthy ways to deal with the issue, and for this and many other reasons, that relationship fell apart in the summer of 2005.

I never breathed a word of my submission fantasies to anyone, not even my close friends, and not even the few friends I had who were openly kinky. I had always been afraid of talking about sex and was intimidated by those to whom it seemed to come so easily—and on top of that, I was worried sick about what it meant that I, an anarchist woman, fantasized about being controlled, dominated, and used by a man.

1. "BDSM" stands for bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadism/masochism. Sort of a catch-all term for sexual activities that fuck with power and/or pain; also known loosely as "kink."

2. This stands for "domination/submission." Many people write this "D/s," intentionally capitalizing the "D" and lowercasing the "s." Some people in the BDSM scene uppercase names and pronouns for dominants or tops and to lowercase them for submissives or bottoms. I prefer to lowercase both.

Fast forward to the very end of 2005, when I started seeing someone new. From the very beginning, I sensed that he might actually have dominant tendencies, but even then couldn't bring myself to say anything for a good month after we'd started having sex. Then I asked him, one night, if he would tie my hands together. The discussion that followed was the beginning of a long process of discarding all of the shame and guilt I had felt about my desires.

It's pretty incredible how much I've changed over the past three years. I feel a degree of confidence in my sexuality, and in myself as a whole person, that I have never experienced before. I don't mean to imply that submission and masochism are somehow inherently tools for self-realization or confidence, but rather that anything that unlocks hidden desires, shatters taboos, and destroys conventional notions of morality can be liberatory.

This process is one I'm still working through today. I can now have vibrant discussions about BDSM and about the gritty details of my sex life (and my emotional life)—but about 80% of it happens online, behind the anonymous moniker of "Subversive Submissive." Much of the other 20% happens behind closed doors with my partner. I still have a long way to go. I still look forward to the day when I can use my real name, when I can be open about my sex life, when I no longer feel afraid.

This zine, and the blog that accompanies it, is a big part of that process.

BDSM 101

I compiled this a couple of years ago as a reaction to a lot of common (and annoying) misconceptions I've heard or read about BDSM...

* Submissives and masochists are not interested in receiving nonconsensual pain, abuse, or rape. It does not mean that submissives have an inherent sense of worthlessness, are cowardly or "mousy" in their relations to others, or are incapable of standing up for themselves.

* Dominants and sadists are not interested in committing nonconsensual pain, abuse, or rape. It does not mean that they have over-inflated egos, are domineering and controlling in their relations to others, and are incapable of tolerating criticism.

* There are many varieties of sexual expression found within BDSM, including masochistic doms, non-submissive bottoms, and switches (who enjoy both topping and bottoming).

* Some people into BDSM are aroused by the fact that it is transgressive and "perverted." For many others, this has no bearing on their sexuality. For some, this fact is nothing more than (at best) an annoyance and (at worst) a threat to their well-being.

* BDSM is not the same as a leather / rubber / vinyl fetish, although for some these interests do overlap. Not all female doms wear corsets and high heels; there is not a dress code for being kinky. Not all kinky people use whips, handcuffs, chains, and leather restraints.

* Some sado-masochistic people believe that their inclination towards domination or submission stems from their gender. Many others don't. There are large numbers of male submissives and female dominants, not to mention all the trans and genderqueer folks. To say that BDSM is about "men dominating women" is not only factually inaccurate, it is dismissive (or perhaps just ignorant) of the gay leather community that birthed social BDSM organizations.

* BDSM is not restricted to a particular sexual orientation, race, ability, age, political ideology, or religious affiliation.

* People in a "24/7" d/s relationship, in which the members often identify as "master" and "slave," are not necessarily "always in scene." Rather, they may simply enjoy having their relative roles inform their everyday interaction with each other, to varying degrees. Slaves do not always have their entire lives regulated by their master, but only certain components of it.

* Identifying as a dominant/sadist or submissive/masochist is not the same as sexual experimentation or trying out a blindfold or some toys to spice up your sex life. It is not a "phase." It is a sexual identity.

* Kinky people do not always have multiple partners. They are not always involved in "the scene."

* Sado-masochism is not necessarily the result of childhood abuse, trauma, or rape, and is not necessarily linked to mental illness. Some kinky people do tie their past experiences to such things, which is fine, but I am not one

of them. I can't explain to you why I enjoy the things I do, and I shouldn't have to.

* Sado-masochism is not the result of The Patriarchy. This is silly and reductionist, and negates the experiences of every kinky person who is not strictly a male dom or a female sub.

* Sado-masochists do not actually want to live in a world of strict hierarchies, slavery, authoritarianism, or oppression. (Most of us, anyway.)

* Being kinky is not "weird" or "gross" to me; it's who I am. Please understand that before making comments about BDSM being perverted and sick.

* Do not assume that because I can say all of this now means that I haven't ever considered the exact opposite of every point I've made. Do not assume that I have not "examined my desires." Please understand that I have struggled for many years to stop hating myself for my desires, and that your comments can cause a lot of pain. The bad kind.

Navigating the Scene (as an Anarchist)

For the first three or four years that I was aware of my submissive desires, I had no real knowledge of "the scene." Sex, to me, was something that took place between me and my monogamous partner in the confines of our bedroom; the nature of that sex was something that the two of us would determine and explore on our own. Sure, I knew that there were sex clubs, and I knew of the gay leather scene from the years I spent living on Folsom Street in San Francisco. But I had no idea that there were organizations that held workshops on exploring submissive headspace or negotiating scenes or learning new ways to play. In fact, the terms "submissive headspace," "scene," and "play" weren't even in my vocabulary at the time.

So instead, I learned about my sexuality through trial and error. I learned about my limits, and I learned that I needed to speak up when I didn't like something, or if there was something that I wanted to try. As I became more comfortable with my desires, I found new ones popping up out of nowhere. Things I'd said I wasn't interested in two months earlier were now things I was dying to try out. And it went like this for quite a while.

Then I discovered the kinky blogosphere, and started obsessively reading about others' experiences. I bought a copy of *SM 101*. I learned about the scene, and eventually went to the Citadel (a BDSM play space) for a bondage workshop. I was fascinated by the existence of the scene, and while I was extremely intimidated by it, I also felt strongly drawn to it, both because of the possibilities for learning new things and because of the outlet it (theoretically) provided for me to actually *talk* about this stuff with other people who felt the same way I did.

Eventually, though, I started to see its flaws, and began noticing things that made me feel uncomfortable. When I went to a meeting of the Exiles, a women's BDSM organization, I felt stifled by the administrative hierarchy and the membership-driven aspect of the group. The overwhelming presence and fetishization of leather was a big turn-off for me as a vegan; the fact that the room applauded wildly when someone mentioned that the Folsom Street Fair had been endorsed by the mayor, Gavin Newsom, made me feel similarly uncomfortable and out of place. A little later, when attending a "beginner's workshop" at the Citadel, I overheard people talking about taking part in a "neighborhood watch" program, essentially cooperating with the police to sweep out the homeless and other undesirables of SOMA.

And that's when it dawned on me that most people within the BDSM scene are just like most people outside of it: they don't have a strong critique of authority in general; they're not all that opposed to or even aware of certain forms of gender essentialism; they have no interest in animal liberation, and would consider me strange (or perhaps "finicky") for my opposition to leather.

None of this is to say that I'm shocked that kinky people aren't more politically radical, or to be judgmental of them for not "knowing better," or anything like that. It's to say that sexual preferences aside, *kinky people are pretty normal*. Sure, kinky folks come from all walks of life, but the vast majority of them are going to be, well, just like the vast majority of non-kinky folks. And I tend to have very little in common with those people.

Yet, at the same time, I also have very different issues and problems when it comes to dating, relationships, and sex than do other people in my immediate social circles. I'm not just talking about those who'd judge or reject

me for my preferences, although that's certainly a concern of mine. I'm talking about the fact that when my partner and I are having problems related to our d/s or to a scene that went badly, I can't tell my friends about it, because it would make them uncomfortable. I censor a lot of what I like to do during sex (especially spanking, flogging, etc.) when my roommates are home, because I'm afraid of what they'll think or that they wouldn't want to hear it. I can't tell anyone about a lot of honestly life-changing experiences I've had through BDSM, because describing them would probably sound disturbing to most of my friends.

Now, of course, part of this is just my own fear of being out—but that alone indicates to me that yes, I do feel the need for some sort of community, however small, of people who have a similar sexual identity. I do want to have a group of people to talk to, to share ideas and stories with, to learn from and, maybe, to play with. However flawed it may be, the scene definitely has its benefits: workshops can teach us skills faster and better than we can teach ourselves, and can make us feel more confident in doing things we consider risky. Social gatherings are good ways to meet people who are interested in the same sort of sex that you like, if you're looking for play partners or people to date. If you're excited by the idea of public sex, play parties are great places to do that. And if you feel shame or doubt about your fantasies, discussion groups with other kinky people can be way better than any therapist.

But here's the thing—I don't want to pay $20 to take a workshop from an "expert" every time I want to learn about a new activity. I don't want to go to a social gathering where I have nothing in common with anyone in the room outside of our fetishes. I don't want to meet play partners who think that we're simply bringing out the latent non-sexual power dynamics that already exist

between men and women. I don't want to have conversations about d/s dynamics with people who think that real-life hierarchical structures are just fine. The political opinions of the people I play with affect how I view our d/s dynamic, because they make me wonder how much of that power dynamic is sexual fetish and how much is what they actually believe is an appropriate way for human beings to interact. It affects how deep I can go into subspace while still feeling safe.

So what to do?

Find like-minded people and build your own damn scene.

The 2008 BASTARD conference in Berkeley (http://sfbay-anarchists.org/conference) featured a panel discussion on BDSM and anarchism, and I later met up with two of the people involved to talk about starting a group for kinky anarchists to talk with and learn from each other. We wanted to get other people together who were like us, who don't feel comfortable being kinky in the anarchist scene and who don't feel comfortable with the BDSM scene because we're anarchists. A year later, we now have a handful of people meeting once a month to talk and hang out together, to talk about our experiences and, as we get to know each other better, to share new ones.

And it's not just us. As I learn more about BDSM history, it's evident that there have been criticisms of the scene for a long time. Here in San Francisco, there's an awesome group called screwup that exists as an alternative to the mainstream scene for kinky trans and genderqueer folks. It was formed both as a response to BDSM spaces that didn't really understand the specific needs of the trans community and as an alternative to a scene focused on traditional top-down power structures, for-profit workshops organized by "professionals" and "experts,"

and expensive toys and fetish wear. Screwup is non-hierarchical and staunchly DIY in its philosophy; workshops are put on by anyone who wants to do one. It's all done on a volunteer basis, so workshops are free, with donations requested just to cover the cost of renting a space.

There are alternatives to the big BDSM/leather conferences and weekend events, too. Just recently, in New York City, a group of mostly young kinky folks started up something called KinkForAll, modeled after the "unconferences" organized by open-source software geeks and hackers. The motto is "no spectators, only participants," and the workshops at the event are all scheduled by people simply showing up and writing their names in slots on a big grid. The idea is that everyone has something they can contribute, not just established "names" in the scene or people who have a long list of credentials to prove their kink knowledge. Everyone who shows up is expected to either lead a workshop or help with the event in some other way.

So this is all to point out that there *are* alternatives to the mainstream scene, if you're interested in having some sort of source of support and education but don't feel comfortable venturing into the larger BDSM spaces. Does this mean that I'm never going to interact with the mainstream BDSM scene again? No—of course not. In fact, meeting other people who are critical of the BDSM scene has actually made me *more* comfortable engaging with it; just knowing that there are people out there who don't buy into the scene as it stands makes me feel okay about using it for the positive things it can offer. It makes it easier to tolerate the posturing, the classism, and the general annoyingness of it to know that I'm not the only one—and to know that I don't have to be there because there's no other alternative.

Sexism and BDSM

Over the past few years, I've gotten involved in several online debates about whether or not BDSM is a product of The Patriarchy. The vast majority of the time I spent engaged in these debates was pretty much a waste, of course, but I came away from them realizing that there is a crucial point that should always be acknowledged when talking about BDSM with feminists:

A lot of people who engage in BDSM are sexist.

Pretty simple, right? This is something I can totally agree upon with the radical feminists. Here's the big difference, as I see it, in our perspectives on what the existence of sexism in the BDSM scene means.

From the anti-kink perspective, BDSM is a product of the patriarchy and is thus inherently sexist. Because BDSM is inherently sexist, we mainly see male dominant–female submissive pairings in which men get whatever they want from the women who serve them because they have been socialized to submit.

From my perspective, BDSM is a product of human sexuality and its wide variety of expressions and is not inherently sexist nor inherently feminist. Because we live in a sexist and heterosexist society, we mainly see male dominant–female submissive parings, while any other combinations, including those involving trans and queer folks, are marginalized; and female dominants are largely still expected to be fetish objects for submissive men. (Or they aren't really thought to exist.) Also because of the sexist culture in which we are socialized, there are a lot of men (in general) who are accustomed to getting what they want from women, and there are a

lot of women (in general) who have a hard time saying "no" and sticking to it. This means that there exist male dominants who expect all women to defer to them (if not to submit entirely) and female submissives who find it difficult to negotiate or leave relationships.

Unfortunately, it is often tricky to see sexism at work in BDSM relationships, because it's hard to tell how much is "fetish" and how much is "what I really think." A hell of a lot of what we do can look like straight-up abuse, and when all we have is the surface, the image, it's difficult to think "these people have both consciously chosen to do what gives them the most pleasure, and it does not mean that she has any less *real* freedom or control over her life." This is made doubly difficult by the fact that sometimes, and especially when people are very new to BDSM, kink can be used as a mask to hide sexism for what it really is. (Of course, all sorts of things can be used to mask sexism outside of kink culture, and it's a cliche that love can be used to mask abuse in any relationship.)

So while it may be a little more difficult to pick out "real" sexism in the BDSM scene than in mainstream society, the sexism is still exactly the same. We live in a sexist society, and a lot of that spills over into the BDSM scene—just as it spills over into the anarchist scene, or any subculture. But this is much, much different than saying that because some (or even a lot) of dominant men are sexist asshats, *any* man who is sexually dominant is a sexist asshat; or that because a lot of submissive women have a hard time really saying no, *any* woman who is sexually submissive is obviously just being manipulated.

The problem is not dominant men who enjoy activity X, but dominant men who say things like "well, if you don't enjoy X then you're not a *true submissive*." The problem is not that submissive women eroticize

Y, but that some submissive women do Y even when they're really, truly not wanting to do it, because they feel like they're being "bad" if they safeword or refuse. The problem is not dominant men who seek out submissive women to play with or to form relationships with, but dominant men who assume every kinky woman they meet is in need of a strong man to teach her about her deep submissive urges (regardless of whether or not she identifies as a dominant or submissive). It is not a problem if a submissive woman likes being whipped, but it is a problem if she doesn't have some sort of basic control over when and how she is being whipped.

The actual things that we do are not the problem. It is the way that we approach and relate to what we do. We need to learn to discern the difference between male dominant–female submissive dynamics that are based on real, mutual pleasure and those that are informed by sexist notions of how men and women should interact.

But here's the point: That sort of sexism needs to be addressed by those of us who practice BDSM, not those standing around on the outside looking in. If you're not part of a particular community, then before jumping to conclusions about what needs to be done, take a minute to find out what that community is already doing about it, what debates or discussions are already taking place. See what they have to say first.

Sexism in the BDSM scene is a definite problem, and needs to be addressed wherever it occurs. But the people who need to critique and deconstruct and examine kinky practices are those of us who actually engage in it.

Coming Out

It's only been over the last few years that I've started feeling comfortable with myself as a sexual being. Part of that is because I'd never before been able to explore my masochistic and submissive side with someone who truly reflected that desire back in his sadism and dominance. Other lovers had always expressed a desire for me, of course, but it wasn't until I felt someone desire me *as* a submissive and as a masochist—because I loved to be at his feet, not in spite of it—that I felt sexy and attractive. It also helped that my partner is comfortable with talking about his own sexuality and his own desires, and encourages me to open up without being forceful or judgmental about it.

The other part is because of the outlet I find in writing it all down in my blog. There, writing anonymously, I've been able to speak freely about my fetishes with other people like me, without any fear of being judged. It's started to make me feel more and more comfortable with the idea of being out, as it were, to not feel the need to lie about my sexuality or to hide the fact that I'm kinky.

But there's a world of difference between "being out" to other kinky folks on the Internet and to vanilla friends. A few years ago, while talking to a group of friends, one of them began describing a documentary on fetishes he'd recently watched, and how uncomfortable it made him feel. He was specifically talking about a section of the documentary that dealt with people who enjoy being humiliated, and expressed his shock upon learning that people *actually did this*, that this existed.

Immediately, I felt my stomach churning, and I became terrified to respond in any way—I was afraid

that any reaction, however slight, would either "give me away" or be a lie; I was afraid to say something like, "Of course people do that, and there's nothing wrong with it," but I also wasn't about to nod in agreement with him or act like I didn't know anything about it.

Then, two other women in the group—both self-identified feminists—began to discuss whether or not such activities were "okay."

"I guess it's okay if the woman wants to...but what if the man gets used to it and starts to expect that from all women?"

Here's what I wanted to say: "First of all, why do you get to decide what is or isn't an acceptable sexual practice for a woman to engage in? And why are you immediately assuming that humiliation play always involves a man humiliating a woman? And please—BDSM is not a 'gateway drug' to real-life abuse."

Instead, I just walked away.

I felt ashamed, afterward, for not being brave enough to speak out, for not saying a word to refute them. Any word would mark me, I was afraid, as one of those freaks—or worse, as a bad feminist, as a self-hating woman, as a *masochist*. Since then, I've had this ongoing terror that surfaces any time a friend mentions sadomasochism or bondage or anything of the sort, a fear that I'll be put on the spot and have to decide whether to speak out or to leave the room.

Part of me feels like it's something I need to challenge, constantly, and that I need to be more assertive and open about my sexuality. That every time I keep silent when someone makes a joke about masochists, I lose. Part of me feels like I should just not let it bother me so

much, that I don't have to be a BDSM spokesperson, and that I should just remind myself that these people don't know what the fuck they're talking about.

Sometimes I feel like writing a "just so you know" email to all my friends, or posting on my more public blog or hell, putting a flyer on my bedroom door. I'm tired of feeling like there's this big secret part of my life that my friends can't know about, but I also don't feel like there's any good way to bring it up, or even really a reason to, aside from those rare occasions when a friend makes some uninformed comment about BDSM and hurts my feelings. I've never really talked to most of my friends about sex, to begin with—so suddenly talking to them about my kinky side would feel very strange. And maybe I don't need to, or at least not to everyone. But I do hate this feeling of hiding, the fear of being found out, and the fear of rejection.

Self-Injury and BDSM

I think I've actually had two major "coming out" challenges in my life. One, obviously, has been accepting my sexual desires and fetishes for what they are, not being ashamed of them, and (more recently) not shying away from talking about them with other people.

The other has to do with something most people in this society would call mental illness, and my struggle to accept that as part of my life, to not feel ashamed or scared of it, and to work my way through it as I see fit—not as my family or lover or doctor sees fit.

The best description I have ever heard of the sort of mental and emotional problems I struggle with is *overwhelm*, a concept I first read about in Peter Breggin's *Toxic Psychiatry*. In my case, overwhelm generally takes two forms: an intense anxiety marked by racing thoughts, uncontrollable crying, and an inability to speak coherently; and an intense depression in which I freeze up and become unable to move or speak at all, sometimes even unable to form complete thoughts. Neither one is very fun to deal with.

When I was sixteen, I learned that pain could help me cope with both anxiety and depression, that the tip of a match's head or a cut into my arm could provide a point of focus when my thoughts were racing or wake me up when I was unable to feel anything. I was always afraid of this self-injury, and ashamed of it. Everything around me had taught me that this was not the right way of dealing with problems, that it was pathological and a sign that there was really something wrong with me. I knew that were I to be caught, I'd be sent right back to the therapist I'd finally convinced my parents I didn't need. I successfully hid my scars throughout high school,

and swore off self-injury entirely around the age of nineteen or twenty.

At the time I first began to date my current partner, I had just started to burn myself again. I had noticed him looking at the scars on my arms several days before he asked about them. I was expecting worry or concern—my last partner, I was sure, would have tried to talk me into "getting help." Instead, he asked me how it made me feel, and if I felt like it helped me. He seemed to understand my need for focus, and he understood that pain was a reasonable (if, perhaps, unusual) method of obtaining that. (It's not really much of a surprise, in retrospect, that someone comfortable with his own pleasure at inflicting pain wouldn't be judgmental of someone who derived satisfaction from receiving it.)

It's a very difficult thing for a partner to witness my overwhelm, especially when that overwhelm often involves an inability to communicate, to say what's wrong or what I need. It can too easily be (and has been) interpreted as an attempt to shut my partner out, to ignore him. And even though my current partner understands that this is not the case, it's still been pretty fucking challenging for him to deal with these mental states—especially when there seems to be nothing he can do to help me snap out of it, to come back down to earth.

Then came a night when, while lying in bed with him, I froze up. He asked me again and again what he could do to help me, but I could only stare back, unable to respond or to even think of what he could possibly do to help. He began to simply run his hands over my body, arms and legs and chest and face. And then he used his nails. And then harder, until the pain cut through and I felt again, and then he let me lay still, now euphoric from the combination of not-quite-being-in-my-body and the

pain. I started laughing. He attached a dozen clothespins to me, and let me breathe it in and out, relaxing even as the pain increased, even as he took them off and the blood rushed back in to sting my skin.

And it all released, and I cried, and cried. Not just because I was suddenly released from a terrible mental state, but because this was okay, this was all okay.

The message I internalized when I was younger was the same for my mental aberrations as it was for my sexual deviancy: *pain is always bad*. Inflicting pain is bad, and willingly taking it for yourself is bad. And so, having him be the one to wield the pain, and to tell me I was beautiful as I took it in, completely shattered both of those falsehoods in one stroke.

Suggested Further Reading

Subversive Submissive (my blog)
http://subversivesub.wordpress.com

Beyond the Hills (personal blog of a sadistic anarcho-primitivist)
http://beyondthehills.wordpress.com

Let Them Eat Pro-SM Feminist Safe Spaces
(collaborative feminist BDSM blog)
http://sm-feminist.blogspot.com

Sex Geek (sex and queer theory nerdery)
http://sexgeek.wordpress.com

Maybe Maimed but Never Harmed
(personal blog of a bisexual submissive man)
http://maybemaimed.com

Other Resources

Anarkink (Bay Area anarchist and anti-authoritarian BDSM group)
http://anarchistbdsm.wordpress.com

Screwup (Bay Area trans and genderqueer BDSM group)
http://screwup.info

KinkForAll (A wiki for folks interested in "unorganizing" a Kink-ForAll in their city)
http://kinkforall.pbwiki.com

FetLife (like MySpace, but kinky—and not owned by News Corp.)
http://fetlife.com

Individually—and thus in a strictly temporary way—we must learn how to sustain roles without strengthening them to the point where they are detrimental to us. How to use them as a protective shield while at the same time protecting ourselves against them. How to retrieve the energy they absorb and actualise the illusory power they dispense.

—*Raoul Vaneigem,* The Revolution of Everyday Life